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Extended Remarks on the 92nd Anniversary of U.S. Citizenship
March 3, 2009

92 years ago, President Woodrow Wilson affixed his signature to a bill sent to him by the Congress. 1500 miles away, the people of Puerto Rico—U.S. nationals since 1899—became U.S. citizens.

Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States is as close as it is complex. The relationship has undergone periods of strain in the past. In some instances, promises of equal treatment took too long to redeem or have yet to be fully redeemed. There are aspects of the relationship that should trouble men and women of conscience.

But like so many American stories, this American story is a chronicle of progress, of evolution, and of the steady and determined march towards a more perfect union.

For me, as for millions of my constituents, the pride we feel in being Puerto Rican is matched only by the pride we feel in being American citizens. To those people of good faith who believe that these two sentiments are inconsistent, or who express concern that any further strengthening of the bond between Puerto Rico and the United States will result in a weakening of Puerto Rico's unique identity and culture, I respectfully submit that history and experience demonstrate otherwise.

The sons and daughters of Puerto Rico have been fighting for our country from almost the moment citizenship was granted nearly a century ago. In Europe and the Pacific; in Korea and Southeast Asia; in Afghanistan and Iraq—in each of these distant places, men and women from the Island have done battle in defense of this great nation.

Thousands of these veterans were fortunate enough to return home. Having the opportunity to meet them—to hear their stories and shake their hands—is one of the great privileges of my job. Without saying a word, these American soldiers from Puerto Rico, fiercely proud of their country and their Island roots, provide powerful testimony that these feelings complement rather than contradict one another. So too does the indelible image of the soldier's casket, being lowered into the earth at the National Cemetery in Bayamón, lovingly draped in both the American and Puerto Rican flags.

On this anniversary, I salute the 4 million U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico.